**Parashat Re'eh: Idols, Justice, and Joy**
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This week's Torah portion, which Zach will read tomorrow morning, begins with one small but powerful word: **Re'eh — "See!"** It's right up there with the great imperatives of Torah:

Look. Listen. Hear. Pay attention.

If Torah were written in today's vernacular, this parashah might begin with a divine shout from the heavens: *"Hey, you over there — pay attention!"*

*"Re'eh – See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the Eternal your God; the curse, if you turn away"* (Deut. 11:26–28).

This is not an abstract theological statement. It is a charge to live awake to the consequences of our choices, both individual and collective. Torah says: *See. Open your eyes. Pay attention.* It's an instruction rooted in Torah but intended for every aspect of life.

There is a famous story about Abraham Joshua Heschel, the great 20th-century Jewish theologian and civil rights leader.

Heschel would sometimes enter his classroom at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, set his briefcase down, look at his students, and begin not with a lecture but with a question:

**"Did you notice the miracle that just happened?"**

The students would look at him, puzzled. Nothing unusual seemed to have occurred. Then Heschel would explain:

*"The sun rose this morning. The air filled our lungs. We made our way here, and we are alive, able to learn Torah together. You walked down the street without the earth opening up beneath your feet. You breathed in and out, your heart kept beating, and your eyes saw light. That is the miracle."*

For Heschel, the challenge was not that miracles don't exist — it's that we fail to notice them. The spiritual life, he taught, begins with cultivating awareness of the extraordinary within the ordinary. He called this **radical amazement** — living with eyes open to the constant wonder of existence.

And that is the heart of Re'eh. Heschel's point was that most of us look without truly seeing. The Torah's imperative and Heschel's classroom question are the same: *wake up — stop sleepwalking through life, and notice the miracle already before you.* Or, in today's terms: *"Get your head out of your screen and notice the miracles in the world around you.*

The great spiritual danger is not that we stop believing in miracles, but that we stop seeing them. And when we fail to see, when our eyes grow dull, something else always rushes in to fill the void: **idols.**

In the ancient world, idols were stone and wood. In our world, they take subtler forms. Idolatry begins the moment we stop noticing the miracle of life and instead elevate something finite to infinite worth. Money, power, nation, even the self they can all serve as idols if we are not paying close attention.

That's why Re'eh **doesn't just** call us to look with wonder — it calls us to look with **moral clarity**.

What do we see? Blessing — or only ourselves: our wants, our desires, our possessions to acquire or exploit?

Because seeing without moral clarity is dangerous. When all we see are our own appetites, we begin to worship them. That is idolatry. Not statues of stone, but the idolatry of self: the belief that my wants are ultimate, my power unquestionable, my consumption limitless.

Re'eh calls us to a different kind of vision — one that sees beyond the self to Jewish values, community, and responsibility.

Re'eh commands us to destroy idolatry: *"You must demolish their altars, smash their pillars, burn their sacred posts, and obliterate their idols"* (Deut. 12:3). It is an uncompromising command.

We could dismiss this as an ancient concern. After all, none of us are tempted to bow to a Golden Calf. But Torah speaks in the present tense.

Perhaps the most dangerous idol of our time is the worship of autonomy itself. Modern society prizes self-expression, self-gratification, self-sovereignty. Freedom is often defined as the absence of restraint: *"I can do what I want, when I want, because it's my choice."*

But Torah insists: freedom without responsibility isn't really freedom at all — it's self-indulgence dressed up as freedom. When everything is about "me" — my wants, my needs, my independence — we stop seeing the people around us. We stop noticing our responsibilities to family, to community, to the vulnerable, to the world itself.

Think of how consumer culture tells us our wants define reality. How politics often reduces to *"what's in it for me."* How technology constantly reinforces the sense that the world revolves around the individual user.

Torah shouts back: *No.* You are free — but never alone. You are free — but your freedom is bound up with your neighbor's. You are free — but you are not the center of the universe.

In our parashah, our ancestors were commanded to smash idols of stone.

Today, we are commanded to smash the idols of self.

And like them, we don't do it once and move on. We do it again and again, every time those idols creep back into our lives or our society.

Re'eh moves directly from idolatry to tzedakah. Why? Because the surest test of whether life is centered only on ourselves or open to others is generosity — how we treat the vulnerable.

The Torah is clear: *"Do not harden your heart or shut your hand against your needy brother. Rather, open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be"* (Deut. 15:7–8).

Notice the language: **heart and hand.** Judaism knows generosity is not just about writing a cheque. It is about softening the heart, cultivating compassion, and extending that compassion into action.

Maimonides taught that to refuse to give is to deny our very identity as Jews. Tzedakah is not philanthropy for the wealthy; it is the shared responsibility of every Jew. Whether with coins, time, attention, or presence, each of us is called to open our hand — and with it, our heart. To see beyond the idolatry of self and self-interest, and to make space for others.

This remains countercultural. In a world where giving is treated as a hobby for the privileged, Judaism insists that giving is who we are. And when we open our hands, we not only provide for another — we reshape our own hearts.

Re'eh reminds us: these teachings are given as the Israelites prepare to enter the Land. For forty years, they wandered. Now they are about to be rooted. And Torah insists: only once you are settled can you fully live out its vision.

The festivals, the tithes, the centralization of worship — all presume a settled people. The wandering generation lived on miracles: manna, water from a rock. The settled generation would live on responsibility: agriculture, society, and justice.

As an aside, in preparing this sermon I came across a teaching in **Sifrei Deuteronomy**, a rabbinic commentary on our parashah. The rabbis taught that living in the Land of Israel was equivalent to performing all the mitzvot, because so many could only be fulfilled there. They even tell of sages who set out to leave the Land, but turned back when they remembered the verse from this parasha: *"You shall possess it and dwell in it, for in it you can observe all the laws"* (Deut. 11:31–32).

For anyone who wonders whether Judaism and the Land of Israel are truly connected, this parasha is a reminder: for thousands of years our people have seen that connection as essential — so much so that the rabbis said the fullness of Jewish life could only be realized in the Land itself.

Which brings us back to Re'eh's charge: wherever we are, the real question is — what do we see, and how do we respond?

There is a deep truth here: living a Jewish life is not abstract. It takes shape in place, in community, in rootedness. When life is rootless, when we are disconnected, Jewish life dries up. But when we root ourselves — in synagogue, in family, in tradition — Jewish life flourishes.

This is why synagogue matters. This community is our Land. Here we root ourselves in Torah, in ritual, in one another. Here Jewish life becomes real, not theoretical. Here blessing becomes visible.

Finally, Re'eh is not only about what we must do, but about the joy that comes from doing it.

Again and again the parashah repeats: *"You shall rejoice before the Eternal your God"* (Deut. 12:12, 14:26, 16:11, 16:14).

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks noted that the root **sin-mem-chet** (samayach) appears more times in Deuteronomy than in the rest of the Torah combined. Deuteronomy is literally the book of joy.

But notice: joy here is not an emotion we chase. It is not about fun or entertainment. It is about rejoicing in living Jewishly. The rituals, the festivals, the shared meals — all are structured to create joy.

Why? Because joy is the natural outgrowth of lives lived in connection — to one another, to our tradition, to something larger than ourselves. We don't find joy by chasing after it. We find it when we open our hearts, extend our hands, and root ourselves in community.

And this is why the Torah can command joy. You cannot command happiness. But you can command the practices that generate joy: generosity, celebration, gratitude, community.

In our time, when so many chase the **idolatry of happiness** and end up with emptiness, Judaism — and this parashah in particular — guides us toward joy: joy rooted in our values, in our community, in lives of meaning and connection.

So Re'eh sets before us a choice. Blessing or curse. Idolatry or covenant. Closed hands or open ones. Wandering or rootedness. Emptiness or joy.

And here's the truth: these are not one-time choices. They are daily choices. Each morning, we wake up with idols to topple. Each day, we have a chance to open or close our hand. Each week, we can choose to root ourselves or to drift. Each moment, we can cultivate joy or let it slip past us.

The Torah does not say: *Once you choose blessing, it will always be yours.* It says: *See — today I set before you.* Today, and tomorrow, and the next day.

We are called to see clearly. To choose wisely. To topple our idols, open our hands, root ourselves in community, and discover joy.

That is the blessing. That is the choice. **Re’eh — See it. Choose it. Live it.**

**Shabbat Shalom.**